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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 001153

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [IZ](#) [IR](#)

SUBJECT: SADR TO COALITION: HEY INFIDEL, WE WILL ALWAYS BE
ENEMIES

REF: HILLAH 46 (RIYADH AL-NURI ASSASSINATION)

Classified By: Political Counselor Matt Tueller for reasons 1.4 (b, d).

¶1. (C) Summary: After more than six months of relative silence, Muqtada al-Sadr has issued three public statement in the past five days. The latest statement on April 12 addressed recent public remarks by Secretary Gates (who Sadr branded a "terrorist") and is a rabble-rousing screed that turns repeatedly to Sadr's lowest-common-denominator refrain of enmity toward the Coalition. Although the statement did not expressly lift Sadr's freeze on Jaysh al-Mehdi (JAM) operations, it gives implicit sanction to attacks against Coalition targets and may be interpreted by militant Sadrist as a relaxing of the freeze for at least this limited purpose. It also calls into question Sadr's willingness to participate in provincial elections, and more broadly in Iraq's fledgling democracy. A local political observer with good lines into the Sadrist Trend told us that Trend officials are blaming Badr cadres, possibly with the active assistance of Iranian Qods Force operatives, for the April 11 assassination of senior Sadr aide Riyadh al-Nuri. An ISCI/Badr source refuted this allegation, blaming it instead on an internal Trend rift over the direction of the movement, and claimed that ISCI/Badr had heard through multiple channels that Sadr has been back in Najaf since Wednesday April 9. End Summary.

April 12 Sadr Statement

¶2. (C) On April 12, Sadrist websites posted a statement attributed to Sadr "in response to the comments of the terrorist (the American Secretary of Defense)." (Note: In an April 11 press conference, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates said "those who are prepared to work within the political process in Iraq, and peacefully, are not the enemies of the United States" and he encouraged Sadr to participate in the political process. End Note.) In his statement, Sadr repeatedly and explicitly rejected Gates' statement and any cooperation with the U.S., saying "you will never be anything but my enemy until the last drop of blood leaves my body." After reciting a well-known Quranic verse entitled "The Infidels," Sadr vowed that "even if you do not take me for an enemy, I consider you as my enemy, and if you do not withdraw from our land or schedule your withdrawal...we will never give up resistance." Referring to calls to join the political process, Sadr asked "What political process do you want me to participate in while you occupy our land? It is we that gave life to the process...because we thought it was a prelude to your departure from our land."

¶3. (C) Sadr emphasized Iraqi unity and downplayed any conflict with the GOI, calling on the GOI "to stand side by side with its people to get the occupier out of Iraq" and saying "the government, parliament, and all those who belong to this holy land are my brothers so long as they are your

(U.S.) enemies." Notably, Sadr clarified that "I do not support armed manifestations in any area as long as it is free from the occupier," giving at least implicit endorsement to armed attacks in areas with a Coalition Force presence. The statement also seemed to sanction violence against Iraqis who cooperate with the coalition, but reserved most of its venom for the Coalition itself. Throughout the text, Sadr used language and verses from the Quran instantly recognizable to his audience as part of a broader Islamic narrative of Muslim resistance to Western occupation. In so doing, Sadr reinforced the theme of recent messages in which he has tried to re-frame his struggle with the GOI as a fight against foreign occupation.

More on Assassination of Riyadh al-Nuri

¶4. (C) Ibrahim al-Sumayda'i, a local political observer who has good lines into the Sadrist Trend, told us April 13 that Trend officials are blaming Badr cadres, possibly with the active assistance of Iranian Qods Force operatives, for al-Nuri's assassination (reftel). According to Trend rumors, al-Nuri reportedly ran afoul of the Iranians by spurning recent Qods Force advances. Haitham al-Husseini, senior aide to ISCI chief Abdel Aziz al-Hakim, told us April 13 that al-Nuri was one of the more influential "moderates" within the Sadrist movement, and that al-Nuri had participated in past mediation efforts between the Sadrist Trend and ISCI/Badr. Haitham conceded that many Sadrists are accusing ISCI/Badr of the killing ("they blame us for every bad thing that happens to their group") but denied that ISCI/Badr was in any way connected with the incident. Haitham pointed out that Badr strongman Hadi al-Amri was one of the first CoR members to condemn the assassination during the April 12 CoR

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session. He speculated that the killing may have resulted from an internal rift over the direction of the Sadrist Trend, and called our attention to a letter purportedly sent recently by al-Nuri to Sadr in which he expressed support for the dissolution of JAM.

¶5. (C) Haitham also said that ISCI/Badr had heard through what he characterized as "three different channels which have been reliable in the past" that Sadr has been back in Najaf since late Wednesday April 9 on a visit from Iran, and that he intends to return to Iran. "Al-Sharq al-Awsat" newspaper carried a similar report, claiming that Iranian officials forced Sadr to return. We note that rumors of Sadr's return to Iraq are not new and have circulated periodically in past months.

Comment

¶6. (C) During the first six-plus months of Sadr's freeze on JAM operations, Sadr issued only two public statements under his name: a December 2007 statement which affirmed the validity of the freeze and a February freeze extension order. Since the GOI's "Operation Charge of the Knights" began last month in Basrah, however, four statements alleging to be from Muqtada have been circulated - three in the past week alone. This sudden burst of often fiery verbiage may signal an attempt by Sadr or his inner circle to more firmly impose leadership and direction on the Sadrist movement while it faces a perceived period of danger. There is no reason not to take Sadr's opposition to the Coalition at face value, as it has been the foundation of his popular appeal since 2003. At the very least, the statement represents a calculated increase in Sadr's rhetorical attacks against the Coalition. Although not a formal lifting of the cease-fire, it gives implicit sanction to attacks against Coalition targets and may be interpreted by militant Sadrists as a relaxing of restrictions on JAM activity for at least this limited purpose. It also calls into question Sadr's willingness to participate in provincial elections, and more broadly in

Iraq's fledgling democracy. Sadr is striking an increasingly strident and militant tone at the same time Maliki insiders Sadiq al-Rikabi and Sami al-Askari tell us -- with apparent but possibly ill-founded confidence -- that the GOI is preparing to strike even harder at what they seem to perceive as a paper JAM tiger that has not obeyed the freeze order since Basrah fighting began last month.

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